

# Your Story Is Your Brand

James D. Petersen  
Co-founder and Executive Director  
The non-profit Evergreen Foundation  
Thirty-third Annual National Indian Timber Symposium  
Red Lion Hotel, Lewiston Idaho, April 20-23, 2009

I am always a little amazed when I get invited to prestigious gatherings like this one.

You are all foresters or engineers or biologists or economists or lawyers or graduates in some other academic discipline that actually means something.

I, on the other hand, am a writer – which means I possess no particular skill beyond a gift for words and great curiosity about the world.

Writers tend to see the world through different eyes than most other folks. If you do not already know this, you will know it by the time I finish.

My father, who worked for a very large mining company here in Idaho, harbored a hope that I would become an engineer or a chemist. He once asked me in a rather pained voice what writers actually *do* for a living.

I said that I could not speak for all writers, but that I made my living asking stupid questions of very smart people.

As you might imagine, my answer did little to calm his fears about his wayward son. So far as he was concerned, I had drifted over to the dark side. I was not doing anything that added to the wealth of nations.

His spirits were lifted somewhat when I left the newspaper business to start my own advertising and public relations business in 1973. They soared even more when I added a lumber company and one of the world's largest aluminum manufacturers to my client list.

Now he could at least describe what I did to old hometown friends when they asked, "What's Jim doing these days?"

I was selling lumber and aluminum and, by God, some day that boy may even amount to something.

Now, nearly 40 years later, I no longer sell aluminum, but in a

figurative sense I do still sell lumber and, more generic to this discussion, I sell good old fashioned, science-based forestry and all that it can mean in a modern-day society that believes the planet is going to hell in a hand basket.

My friend, Tina Hagedorn, who works for Wes Rickard's economics and policy shop in Gig Harbor, Washington, reminded me last night that none of these discussions we are having at this symposium – not third-party forest certification, or carbon sequestration, or climate change, or Earth Day, which was yesterday, and passed without much notice at these proceedings, and certainly not branding – none of these discussions have any validity or make any sense if they are not rooted in the principles of scientific forestry.

Scientific forestry has been with us for a very long time. Its principles come to us from the Prussian School of Forestry. They were first taught in our country by Bernard Fernow, who set up the old Division of Forestry, which later became the U.S. Forest Service, and Carl Schrenk, who set up the first demonstration forest at Biltmore, Cornelius Vanderbilt's fabulous country estate in North Carolina. I believe both Fernow and Schrenk were graduates of the Prussian School of Forestry.

But there are much earlier examples of the successful manipulation of land by people in pursuit of civilization's most basic necessities: food, clothing and shelter. One of them is referenced in the diary of a soldier who was part of the Desoto Expedition that marched the length of Florida in the 1500s. He wrote about the vast corn fields that he observed – part of the highly advanced maize-based culture Indians established along the eastern seaboard in Lord only knows when.

Archeologists were to later discover remnants of water diversion systems in the Southwest, where some of

your ancestors irrigated crops hundreds if not thousands of years ago.

Early white explorers also found you using fire to manage your forests – in many ways a tool every bit as efficient as chain saws and mechanical harvesting systems.

Today, we are again using fire in our forests, and some of us think we invented it. Of course, we did not – you did – and I tend to think its modern-day use is as much for political purposes as it is for reasons have to do with the need to remove excess biomass from forests.

Although you ancestors did not have science in the same way we have science today, they were nonetheless very keen observers of nature – and equally important – they were pursuing a goal or objective, which was to feed, clothe and shelter their number by first manipulating nature.

My friend Tina would also want me to remind you that knowing your goal or objective – and being able to describe it clearly and concisely – is the first of the six rules or principles of scientific forestry.

These principles should never be compromised, and yet they are every day – in the public square, by the press, and in the halls of Congress.

And yet, if you examine these original principles of forestry very closely, you will discover that they are just as reliable as the stars that guided ancient mariners, or the compasses that guided early North American explorers or the GPS systems that guide you in your modern-day forestry work.

These principles also guided me when, in 1986, I wrote the one-sentence mission statement of the non-profit Evergreen Foundation: the Evergreen Foundation exists only to help advance public understanding for science-based forestry and forest policy.

But I'm getting way ahead of myself here, so let's back up for a moment.

When Don Motanic invited me to join you this morning he said he wanted me to talk with you about how the Evergreen Foundation views Indian forest products and where I see opportunities for branding.

I first broached the subject of marketing tribal timber with Gary Morishima more than a year ago. The question I asked was whether ITC member tribes might be interested in developing some sort of plan for marketing tribal timber, perhaps under a common brand or collection of brands. Gary later advised me that the ITC board of directors was interested in exploring the idea. Meanwhile, I have been fortunate enough to actually *find* a lumber company with a strong sales organization that it is also interested in exploring the idea with you. More on this development in a moment.

I have long believed that tribal timber was special because tribal forestry is special. Its philosophical, cultural and spiritual underpinnings speak directly to the Indian connection with land and the earth itself.

There are hundreds of thousands of timberland owners in our country, ranging from giants like Weyerhaeuser and Plum Creek to very small holdings that have been in the same families for generations. But not one of these landowners, regardless of their size, can make the same claims that you can make about *your connections* to the earth, because your connections that date back thousands of years and are based on a very different set of goals and objectives than those which guide most landowners.

The writer in me tells me in no uncertain terms that there is a story here that you need to tell again and again. If there is any romance in forestry – and I believe there is – it lies in what you *do* in your forests. Where forestry is concerned, I know of no other story quite as powerful as yours. And make no mistake: your story *is* your brand. It is the sum total of all that there is to know about you and, in this particular case, the *why* behind the way you manage your forests.

Let's switch reels here for a moment. Earlier I mentioned that I had worked in the advertising and public relations

fields for many years. It is as a former ad man that I want to discuss branding with you. Then you will see how it relates to your forestry story.

Some of you have probably heard the old advertising maxim, "Sell the sizzle, not the steak." You have a tremendous amount of sizzle to sell that no one else has. It rests in the quite thoughtful way in which you balance your economic interests against your spiritual, cultural, social and ecological interests. Save for non-industrial private landowners in the eastern hardwood region who place management emphasis on creating and conserving wildlife habitat, I'm unaware of any other landowner class that attempts to imitate what you do so well.

I sense real branding opportunities here, especially among consumers who are sensitive to a wide range of hot-button environmental issues having to do with living sustainably and respecting our planet.

There are libraries filled with books that discuss the intricacies of successful branding. Allow me to define branding for you in the very simple light in which I see it.

Branding is nothing more than a way for you to differentiate your products or services from those of your competitors.

Your brand says that you are bigger or smaller, faster or slower, lighter or heavier, cheaper or more expensive or, of late, greener than competing products.

Some companies do their branding in song; others use famous actors, customer testimonials, strong photography, consumer surveys or scientific results. A few even use humor, some quite successfully.

No matter the method, your brand says this is who you are, this is what you do and how you do it, and, perhaps most important of all, this is what you stand for. Stripped to its core, your brand is a window on your soul.

The goal in product branding is always the same: it is to increase sales by increasing market share.

You want buyers to remember you - and your brand – so that when it comes time to make a buying decision, they will buy your product first.

I suppose you could make a case for the fact that third-party certification is a crude form of branding, or at least a way for forest landowners to remind their customers that their forests are sustainably managed, that they are going to great lengths to care for their forests and all of the creatures great and small that live in them. Interestingly, where publicly traded companies are concerned, these messages are often aimed squarely at Wall Street, which has become increasingly sensitive to the still nebulous concept of "green" investing.

Branding is extraordinarily difficult if your product is a commodity, like lumber. But innovative lumber companies have gone to great lengths to differentiate themselves and their products from their competitors.

They do it first by becoming fierce niche marketers. Many of the West's most successful lumber companies totally dominate their niches.

Herbert Lumber Company at Riddle, Oregon has customer relationships that date back almost a half century. The company holds a virtual choke hold on the high-end market for appearance grade Douglas-fir timbers cut from big old logs. They buy logs from British Columbia into northern California. In northern California, they buy from two tribes: the Hoopa and the Yurok.

C&D Lumber Company, also at Riddle, is the West Coast's dominant marketer of incense and Port Orford cedar. It has been their specialty since the 1950s. Many saw mills have no interest in sawing cedar, so guess who buys their unwanted cedar logs.

Seneca Sawmill Company at Eugene dominates the domestic market for long dimension lumber. No independently-owned lumber company on earth has invested more money in proprietary technologies that allow it to produce such accurately sawn lumber. At Seneca, lumber is measured with micrometers, not tape measures.

Bennett Forest Industries, now the Idaho Forest Group, differentiated itself strategically. After Boise Cascade shut down its Idaho sawmilling operation, my friend Dick Bennett built a beautiful, state-of-the-art sawmill at Grangeville, Idaho. Now every southern Idaho log that

doesn't make the long road trip to LaGrande, Oregon, has to go north to be milled – and the only mill on Highway 95 between New Meadows and Lewiston is the Idaho Forest Group mill at Grangeville.

Other lumber producers have differentiated themselves by their forest practices. Collins Pine, for example, likes to brag about the fact that they don't clear cut their timber. It's an astute claim in a world that dislikes clear cutting, but of course Collins grows and manages pine that responds best to selection harvesting regimes.

I mentioned third-party forest certification a moment ago. Although many timberland owners have embraced, I am not aware of any that have been able to use certification as part of a successful branding strategy. It's too ubiquitous to offer much in the way of differentiation. What it does do is offer some measure of protection from groups that prey on consumer guilt. Even so, very few consumers appear willing to actually pay more for lumber "branded" as having come from sustainably managed forests.

I haven't checked in quite some time, but last I knew most tribal timberland owners had rejected third party forest certification. Not all of you, but many. It's very expensive and – as I said a moment ago, consumers don't appear to be willing to pay more for certified lumber. Nor do Home Depot or Lowes, neither of whom will buy lumber that isn't third-party certified.

Nevertheless, third-party certification might be worth revisiting. My sense is that it has come a long way since its inception when, for example, clear cutting was not seen as a sustainable forest practice. Moreover, certification criteria are much more localized than they once were – meaning that certification does a much better job of accounting for very real differences in forest types and conditions than it did when it was still in its infancy. I also understand that it is not as expensive as it once was. This may be because there are many more certification systems competing for your business now.

I don't know how much thought the ITC board has given to developing its own forest certification program, but with all of the academics you have in your corner, and the power of the federal government at your back, it

might be worth consideration – especially if certification could then be linked to a branding program.

I said earlier that I had found a lumber company that is interested in talking about marketing tribal lumber. I wish I could tell you who it is, but they have asked me to hold their identity in confidence for the time being. They know you need time to independently consider the idea and they'd like you to extend the same courtesy to them.

However, I can tell you that they are honorable people with a genuine interest in examining this question. They have asked for as much information as possible concerning species, annual production, dimensions and grades so that they can assess the possibilities and pitfalls. I've passed their request along to Gary Morishima and I know that he has asked you to assist him in gathering data that will be needed. I hope you will because you cannot possibly develop a successful branding program without first knowing what you have to sell.

I think this is a good time for you to consider a marketing relationship with an experienced lumber marketer. It's a good time because time is on your side. And time is on your side because lumber markets are in terrible shape right now and probably won't improve much for another year or so. Most economists think it will take at least that long for our country to work through its inventory of foreclosed and unsold homes.

While you are considering the advisability of marketing your lumber through an outside agency, you should also be thinking about branding. There are several very important questions you need to answer. This, too, will take time but, again, time is on your side.

I suppose the first question to be considered is whether all tribes could share in the same brand. I don't know the answer to this question. Remember that branding is an intensely personal business. I would think you would want your own identities in the same way that other companies work to differentiate themselves and their products from those of their competitors.

But on the other hand, if your goal is to say that tribal timber taken in total

in a better consumer choice because of all that is tribal forestry, then it might make sense to consider some sort of over-arching brand. But here branding veers very closely to image building, which is an important part of an overall marketing strategy.

Either way, there are some basic questions you need to answer as you consider how best to brand your products. Here are a few of the more obvious questions.

What is it that you want to brand: your culture, your forestry, your lumber or all three?

Who are your customers?

What do they buy from you?

*Why* do they buy from you?

How do they perceive you?

How do *you* want them to perceive you?

Are they satisfied with your product?

If yes, *why*; if not, *why not*?

Do you want to expand your customer base?

If yes, do you have forest or sawmilling capacity to do so?

What can you do to add value to your product?

Who are your competitors?

What's makes them competitors?

Do you compete well against them?

If yes, *why*, if not, *why not*?

I realize these questions may seem like no-brainers, but you would be amazed at the number of companies that cannot answer them correctly – and until you know the answers to these questions, you cannot successfully address the branding issue.

You may have noticed that all of these questions demand *qualitative* answers. Quantitative information is also important, and I know that all of you have tons of it at your fingertips, but there are intrinsic aspects of the branding discussion that you ignore at your own peril. A flow chart is only as good as the narrative that describes it. Knowing *why* sales increased is just as important as the increase itself, more so in my opinion.

It is also very important for you to know that you have more to sell –

and thus more to brand - than lumber.

My good friend Milt Herbert, who is now in his 80s, has long insisted that the Herbert Lumber Company does not sell lumber. It sells service. Appearance grade Douglas-fir beams that beautify many very expensive homes just happens to be one of the products that go with the service Milt sells.

You probably don't know this, but Milt is also one of the founders of the Umpqua Holdings Company, a banking colossus with nearly \$50 billion in assets and about 160 branch banks in Oregon, Washington and California. Umpqua's CEO, Ray Davis, who I interviewed for a book I wrote on Milt's life, insists that many of the bank's personal touches, including dog watering bowls at the front door, are direct results of Milt's common touch. So too is the fact that one of its Portland branches looks more like a library reading room than a bank.

Little inexpensive things, like dog watering bowls and free newspapers to read, can make a huge and lasting difference in customer relationships. Everything that you do that is of benefit to your customer strengthens your brand.

Apart from lumber – and good service – I believe that tribes have many more things they can market that are a part of the tribal forestry story.

Is it the Mescalero Apache tribe that sells trophy elk hunts? I think so. When I was last a guest in their forest it was apparent that elk habitat conservation was the driving force in their forestry program. It could thus be argued that their timber harvesting program was a *byproduct* of their elk management program. What a great story. What a great brand.

I would argue that there are unique assets in every tribal forest that help define the tribe itself, and certainly its forestry program. These assets are the sum total of the tribe's brand. They help differentiate the tribe from other tribes and from other non-tribal landowners. Others may sell lumber, but the Mescalero Apache also sell trophy elk hunts; others may sell lumber but the Salish-Kootenai tribe can also market some of the most beautiful scenery in the world, including a lake many consider the

crown jewel of the west. It is the sizzle in their forestry program.

Ask yourself what makes you unique. That is the beginning point in the development of a good branding strategy: know who you are and what makes you one in a million. Every tribe is unique in some way. Your job is to find it and find a way to capitalize on it.

In his frustration, Mark Phillips asked a very important question at last night's general membership meeting. He said, "How the heck do we get started?"

May I suggest that this is pretty much a connect-the-dots exercise? Were I you I would start by making a comprehensive list of available resources.

The new Yale University marketing and utilization study would be one resource. So would the work Larry Mason is doing at the University of Washington. So is Vinnie Corrao's very impressive knowledge and experience with forest certification programs. So are the old IFMAT reports. So is the survey Gary has asked you to complete. So is the work Wes Rickard has been doing for many years on the economics and policy front. So is what we have been doing on your behalf in *Evergreen Magazine*. So is the collective wisdom of your friends in the BIA Division of Forestry. And so is your own collective wisdom, handed down from one generation to the next by your tribal elders.

I'd like to close out this morning with something that is only indirectly related to the branding question – but very directly related to tribal forestry. As many of you know, our organization has twice published issues of *Evergreen* focusing on tribal forestry. Our goal in both issues was to tell the story of Indian forestry in America while at the same time hold Congressional feet to the fire on matters having to do with trust obligations.

I learned a great deal in the course of publishing these two issues, and I've formed some pretty strong opinions, not only about tribal forestry but also about the manner in which our government has treated tribes over the last 150 years. If you heard me speak at your symposium two years ago in Polson, Montana you know I believe it is time for our country to

return the forests we stole from you more than a century ago.

Somehow, we need to find a way to build on this idea. What passes for forestry on federal lands today is a travesty. Even so, it's unlikely that the Congress is simply going to hand you the keys to the national forest system. But they might be interested in setting up some very large demonstration projects that you could manage the way you manage your own forests. What if the Colville tribe had the chance to actually manage say, half the Colville National Forest through the next rotation? What if the same opportunity were given to the White Mountain Apache or the Yakama or any other tribe that owns and manages timberland adjacent to a national forest?

Does this idea have any validity? I'd like to think so, but then I am biased in your favor. Be that as it may, I sincerely believe that a side-by-side comparison of what you are doing on your lands with what the government is doing on federal lands would give the public the opportunity they need to decide once and for all which management program yields the results they prefer: yours or the governments. I can't help but think they'll like what you do much better than they like what the government is doing.

As you can readily see, there is a lot to think about in the larger context of what branding is, how brands are created and what branding may bring to tribes that own and manage timberland in these United States. Since 1986, we have made it our mission at *Evergreen* to tell the forestry story in all of its grandeur – and where forestry converges with cultural, historic and spiritual values I know of no grander story than yours.

Always, always, always remember, your story is your brand, and thus a window on your soul. And always remember that where your story is concerned, we will be with you every step of the way.

Thank you